

Rev. Dr. W. Vance Cotten, Sr.  
Pastor of Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church, Middletown  
In Support of Repeal of the Death Penalty, SB -280

I am Rev. Dr. W. Vance Cotten, Sr., Pastor of Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church, the largest and one of the oldest predominantly black churches in Middletown. I have the distinction of being the third pastor since Shiloh's inception. In April, we will celebrate 61 years of ministry. I have led Shiloh for almost twenty-five years.

Additionally, I serve as the President of the New England Missionary Baptist Convention, the oldest Black convention in America. We will celebrate our 138th annual session in July. The New England Convention has member churches from Maine to Virginia. I am also President of New Haven's Christian Leadership Bible College and I serve on several boards throughout Connecticut, including Chair of the Board of Hartford Behavioral Health, CEO of the Board of Shiloh Manor Elderly Housing Complex in Middletown and a board member of the Middlesex County Substance Abuse Council.

My leadership positions and my travels afford me the opportunity to meet and speak to people of all backgrounds and nationalities around the country. A few months ago, just before the execution of Troy Davis, the death penalty was a topic that was often discussed and people were very passionate about it.

Once again, the death penalty is making headlines in Connecticut.

Many people, including myself, held their breath and waited to see if the execution of Troy Davis would take place. Millions of people from around the globe, including the Pope and former Presidents, cried out that we not execute Mr. Davis. In 1989, Davis was convicted of murdering a police officer, based upon the testimony of 9 witnesses. Since then, 7 of the 9 have recanted or changed their testimony. "It was not Davis", they said. With so much doubt swirling around this case, we thought surely the execution couldn't take place. However, we were wrong, and Davis was executed.

Since that night, I have been haunted by the fact that human beings are fallible. Davis' case was not the first time the death penalty system has shown us our limitations. Across the country, 138 men have been released from death rows due to evidence of their innocence. In Connecticut, we have seen several men serve 15 or 20 years of long sentences before we've discovered their innocence. I have preached before on the imperfections of man as compared to the Almighty. To err is human, and there's nothing shameful about the fact that we have limitations. But it is shameful that we undertake something as permanent and serious as the death penalty when we know full well we can, and do, make mistakes. The death penalty system should demand perfection.

There is another way that our human frailties make us poor administrators of the ultimate punishment: we are biased. Sadly, racial bias has long played a part in determining who lives and who dies at the hand of the state. 70% of those on death row in Connecticut are people of color.

Appallingly, while people of color are the victims of homicide 50% of the time, in 80% of cases deemed "worthy" of the death penalty – the victim was Caucasian. What message are we sending to our communities when we react with different outrage over the death of one of our poor or Black children, than we do to the deaths of their Caucasian brothers and sisters?

Troy Davis wasn't the only young black man imprisoned, or even executed, despite legitimate fears he may be innocent. In Connecticut, 3 of the 4 individuals recently exonerated from long prison sentences were people of color. These men are a stark reminder that Connecticut is not immune to having our own "Troy Davis". Try as we will (and should) to keep error and bias from our courtrooms, we are, after all, only human.

To ensure the important conversation about the death penalty continues, I have hosted several rallies to support the repeal of the death penalty, with speakers such as Fernando Bermudez who served 18 years for a murder he did not commit, and Victoria Coward, whose son Tyler was murdered in New Haven in 2007.

I urge you to keep this issue in the forefront and to support a bill to repeal the death penalty in Connecticut.

Thank you.